DANTE AND BEATRICE. AN ESSAY IN INTERPRETATION

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Dante and Beatrice. An essay in interpretation by Lewis F. Mott

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LEWIS F. MOTT

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AN ESSAY IN INTERPRETATION

BY

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DANTE AND BEATRICE.

TO a student of literature, one of the most important and interesting sentiments which influenced mediæval life, is that of chivalrous love. It was the spur of knightly endeavor, the seed of courtesy, the soul of song. From it was thought to spring all virtue and all happiness. In an ideal devotion to his chosen lady, the knight found the chief motive of his enterprises, the most potent incentive to noble and heroic action. What he realized in deed the poet set forth in verse. The beauties and virtues of his mistress furnished him an inexhaustible theme; her eyes were his inspiration; her countenance, his heaven; the thought

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NOTE.—For the quotations from the *Vita Nuova* I have used the translation of Charles Eliot Norton; for those from the *Divine Comedy*, Longfellow's version.

of her, a magnetic power sufficient to draw him away from evil to the gates of Paradise.

Although this sentiment had its birth and reached its greatest development in the south of France, it yet pervaded the life and the poetry of every nation in Christendom and dominated polite letters until the glimmering stars of the middle ages faded in the splendor of the renaissance. Even then it would not die. Discarded by society, it found refuge among the Muses. With "our sage and serious poet Spenser," it survives as a literary tradition, employed to propagate Puritanical religious and moral ideas, but this was its last earnest appearance. For the later poets it has become a mere plaything of the fancy. As a real and living influence, it disappeared long before Don Quixote sallied forth to accomplish his astonishing achievements in honor of the fair Dulcinea.

Even in Dante's day this flower of chivalry had begun to wither. The golden age of its singers had departed. What had been the ideal of courtly life, had become a beautiful fiction, still celebrated by the versifiers, it is true, but in songs which had lost their vitality

because they had lost their truth. The old conceits, the old phraseology, the old forms remained; but the spirit of life had fled. A dull, miasmatic conventionality brooded over Italian poetry and poisoned the national genius.

It was about the middle of the twelfth century that wandering troubadours overspread Italy, sang their lays before the various princes, and impressed their ideal upon courtly life. Native imitators followed, composing their mimic love-ditties first in Provençal and later in Italian. But this counterfeit literature, so contrary to the spirit of the race, was short-lived and feeble. The ornament of palaces and the glory of princes, it flourished only in the sunshine of royal favor and found its most congenial habitation at the luxurious Sicilian court of Frederick II. Here the minstrel found an unfailing welcome and a rich reward. The Emperor himself and his minister, Pier delle Vigne, were noted rhymsters, though their verses appear to us little better than might be expected from an absolute monarch and a secretary of state. But the imperial sun had hardly set when the fair exotic faded

and died. Enzo, the captive king of Sardinia, might well send his canzonetta forth from his dungeon with instructions to "Salute Tuscany, she who is sovereign, in whom reigns all courtesy." The genuine literature of Italy was already born in Florence.

Native and original as it was, this literature still copied the old forms. Its progenitor was the poetry of Provence. The proud citizens of Florence, emulating the cavaliers in prowess and in courtesy, strove also to emulate them in song; but they could not be satisfied with a colorless repetition of extravagant sentiments which had been the baubles of frivolous courtiers. The Italian nation, "born old," as Symonds says, required reality and truth for the basis of serious poetry. Lifeless mannerism and affectation yielded to true feeling. They poured new wine into the old bottles. The love songs of the Troubadours, turned to fresh uses, chanted the praises of a fairer mistress, whose beauty faded not with age, whose eyes shone with a radiance almost divine, whose service was the path of peace,—Madonna Philosphy.

The master and model of the new school

was Guido Guinicelli, whose earthly habitation was Bologna, but who lingers in memory as a denizen of the last circle of Purgatory, where he expiates the sin of lust in the midst of flames whose fervent heat made Dante long to cast himself into molten lead for refreshment. To this singer of dulcet lays

> "Which, long as shall endure our modern fashion,
> Shall make forever dear their very ink,"

Dante pays his tribute of homage and affection. He even calls him

> "The father
> Of me and of my betters, who have ever
> Practised the sweet and gracious rhymes of love."

Throughout the Divine Comedy it is Virgil who is the pilgrim's father, master and guide. It is Virgil to whom alone he owes "the beautiful style that has done him honor." It is Virgil who introduces him to the company of ancient bards into which he is received with permission to rank himself by the side of that "loftiest of poets," of Homer, Horace, Ovid and Lucan, sixth of the glorious group. The symbolism is clear. The Mantuan, "honor and light of the other poets," led him "through

utter and through middle darkness," and was the fountain of his epic song. From him he learned that mastery of language which no other poet of his nation can emulate. From him came those germs which, implanted in his rich nature and nurtured by years of study, discipline and heroic struggle, grew into qualities that have won him a place among the masters of the human spirit. But Dante distinguishes his obligations, and while he thus honors the guide who led him to the summit of Parnassus, he does not forget the singer of dulcet lays who taught him the sweet and gracious rhymes of love. For Dante is not only a world-poet, the lonely wanderer through Eternity; he is also a Florentine of the thirteenth century and the first writer of a school. Around him cluster Guido Cavalcante, "the other eye of Florence," Cino da Pistoja, and many others, whose productions, well-nigh indistinguishable from each other, are often confounded with those of the master himself. They wrote on the same topics, used the same phraseology and dwelt among the same thoughts, as the youthful author of the *Vita Nuova.*